Suzanne Romaine

"It snuck in so smooth and slippery we didn't even hear it":[1] How *snuck* snuck up on *sneaked*

Introduction

The source of my title quote actually refers to a mudslide, but it seems an apt way of describing the recent trajectory of *snuck* in modern English. The origins of the verb *sneak* and its irregular past tense form *snuck* are "shrouded in mystery" according to Robert Burchfield (1998), who wrote:

> First recorded in the 16C., [*sneak*] seems to have emerged from some uncharted dialectal area and made its way swiftly into the language of playwrights . . . . Just as mysteriously, in a little more than a century, a new past tense form, *snuck*, has crept and then rushed out of dialectal use in America, first into the areas of use that lexicographers label jocular or uneducated, and, more recently, has reached the point where it is a virtual rival of *sneaked* in many parts of the English-speaking world. But not in Britain, where it is unmistakably taken to be a jocular or non-standard form. . . . What the future holds for *snuck* is unpredictable.[2]

As can be seen from the timeline I have assembled below for first attestations of main variant forms of *sneak* recorded by the *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*), the earliest example of the stem is the adverbial form *sneakishly,* first attested in 1560. It was soon followed by the first attestation of the adjectival form *sneaking* in 1582.[3] The first attestation for the intransitive verb *sneak* is attributed to Shakespeare's *Henry IV, Part I* (1598), which also provides another first attestation for the variant *sneakeup*, a noun indicating a 'mean, servile, or cringing person', i.e. a sneak. The adverbial form *sneakingly* also dates from the same year. The *OED*'s first entry for the regular past tense form *sneaked* is 1631 but the transitive form of the verb is not recorded until 1684. As for *snuck*, the *OED* says it originated in the US and is chiefly used there. The first attestation appears in 1887 in the *Lantern*, a New Orleans newspaper.

Timeline for first attestations of main variant forms of *sneak* recorded by *OED*

> 1560 *sneakishly* adverb[4]
> All men ¨ cried out vpon Duke Maurice, whiche serued him so sknekyshely, whome he oughte to haue honoured as his father. J. Daus tr. J. Sleidane Commentaries f. cclxx.
>
> 1582 *sneaking* adjective[5]
> But Scylla in cabbans with sneaking treacherye lurcketh. R. Stanyhurst tr. Virgil *First Foure Bookes Æneis* III. 57.
>
> 1598 *sneak* verb (intransitive)[6]; *sneaker* noun[7]; *sneak-up* noun[8]; *sneakingly* adverb[9]
> A poore vnminded outlaw sneaking home. Shakespeare, Henry IV, Pt. 1iv. iii. 60.
> The prince is a iacke, a sneakeup. Shakespeare, Henry IV, Pt. 1iii. iii. 85.
> *Gatto gatto*, groping, creeping, sneakingly as a cat. J. Florio, *Worlde of Wordes.*

[1] *Time magazine* (January 18, 1982) from The Time Magazine Corpus, <http://corpus.byu.edu/time/>, 18 February 2012.

[2] Robert W Burchfield, *The New Fowler's Modern English Usage* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 3rd edition.

[3] An adjectival variant *sneakish* meaning 'farcial' or 'ludicrous' first attested in 1570 is obsolete. *Oxford English Dictionary online version* December 2011, *Sneakish*, adj., <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/183118>; this entry and the following all accessed18 February 2012.

[4] Ibid. *Sneakishly*, adv., <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/183119>.

[5] Ibid. *Sneaking*, adj. , <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/183115>.

[6] Ibid. *Sneak*, v., <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/183107>.

[7] Ibid. *Sneaker*, n., <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/183112>.

[8] Ibid. *Sneak-up*, n., <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/183125>.

[9] Ibid. *Sneakingly*, adv., <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/183116>.

1631 *sneaked* regular past tense[10]
Where's Madrigall? Is he sneek'd hence. B. Jonson, *Staple of Newes* II. iv. 124 in Wks. II.

1684 *sneak* verb (transitive)[11]
Sneak what Ready-money thou hast into my Hand. T Otway, *Atheist* III. 22.

1887 *snuck* verb[12]
He grubbed ten dollars from de bums an den snuck home. *Lantern* (New Orleans) 17 Dec. 3/3.

[10] Ibid. *Sneak*, v.

[11] Ibid. *Sneak*, v.

[12] Ibid. *Sneak*, v.

The *OED* entry for the verb *sneak* says it is of doubtful origin because the form does not agree with that of early Middle English *sniken*, or Old English *snícan* 'to creep, crawl'; (compare cognates Old Norse *sníkja*, Norwegian *snikja*, Danish *snige*, with senses similar to English *sneak*). More precisely, the problem with this route of transmission is that for *snícan* to become *sneak*, it should have passed through the unattested stage *sneek*. Alternatively, if English had borrowed the form from Scandinavian sources, it should have developed into *snike* or *snick*.[13] However, linguistic history is full of unpredictable exceptions and irregular sound changes that make reconstruction difficult.

Nevertheless, as my title indicates, I focus here on the evolution of the irregular past tense variant *snuck* rather than the uncertain etymology of *sneak*. The emergence and subsequent apparently rapid spread of *snuck* is especially intriguing because irregular verbs in modern English constitute a closed class numbering only about 150-180, to which there have been no recent additions.[14] The general drift of change is for strong verbs to regularize in the direction of weak preterites. Here too, however, there are exceptional developments to reckon with. High frequency irregular verbs like *find* generally hold their own and resist analogically created competing forms like **finded*, but less frequent ones like *strive* and *chide* have over time lost ground to their respective regular forms *strived* and *chided,* eventually supplanting the strong forms *strove* and *chode*. Although a few instances of change have proceeded in the opposite direction from weak to strong (as in the case of *dive*, which historically was a weak verb, but now has a variant strong past form *dove*), *snuck* is still perplexing because no other verb in this phonological class creates a strong past with the low back unrounded vowel /ʌ/; compare, for instance, *creak*, *freak*, *leak*, *peak*, *peek*, *reek*, *seek*, *squeak*, *streak*, *wreak*, and *shriek*. Richard Hogg speculates that the vowel /ʌ/ came to be perceived as an "ideophonic marker of past forms regardless of the vowel of the present tense", as in *dig* (*dug*), *strike* (*struck*).[15]

Regardless of its precise origin, the newly formed irregular *snuck* appears to be sneaking up on *sneaked*, and has made decisive and swift inroads into American English over the past hundred years, especially in spoken varieties. Indeed, *The American Heritage Dictionary* contends that although *snuck* appears to have originated as a non-standard regional variant of *sneaked*, and there is still some lingering prejudice against it, "[C]learly it is no longer possible to apply the label *Nonstandard* to *snuck*".[16] The dictionary's rejection of this label is significant in view of the fact that both the first (1969) and second editions (1982) had judged *snuck* as

[13] Anatoly Liberman, "Sneak, Snack, Snuck", *Oxford Etymologist* (November 14, 2007), <http://blog.oup.com/2007/11/snuck/>, 18 February 2012.

[14] Steven Pinker, *Words and Rules: The Ingredients of Language* (New York: Harper Collins, 2000), 16.

[15] Richard M. Hogg, "Snuck: The Development of Irregular Preterite Forms", in Graham Nixon and John Honey, eds., *Studies in English Linguistics in Memory of Barbara Strang* (London: Routledge, 1988), 31-40.

[16] *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2006), xxvii.

nonstandard. Moreover, 67% of the dictionary's Usage Panel still disapproved of *snuck* in 1988, at a time when the use of *sneaked* was still three times more frequent than *snuck* in edited prose in the dictionary's citation files. The acceptance of *snuck* as standard was based on the increasing frequency of *snuck* in 'reputable writing' in publications such as *The New Republic* and the *San Francisco Chronicle*, and in the works of authors like Anne Tyler and Garrison Keillor. Noting that the language practices of the educated middle class generally determine what counts as Standard English, the dictionary was swayed by evidence that *snuck* appeared to be 20% more common than in 1985 and was spreading with each generation so that it is now used by educated speakers in all regions of the United States. Even the Usage Panel's disapproval of *snuck* lessened slightly in 2001, with 61% preferring *sneaked*. Based on frequency of use, the dictionary's style and usage guide opined that "the tide is turning and that broad acceptance of *snuck* is inevitable".[17]

By 2008, the tide had indeed shifted dramatically even in the Usage Panel, 75% of whom approved of *snuck*, completely reversing the position taken in favor of *sneaked* only two decades previously.[18] The dictionary's review of 10,000 citations in 1990 revealed that *sneaked* was still preferred by a factor of 7 to 2. In 2004 a search of newspaper databases showed *sneaked* occurring more frequently than *snuck* by a factor of 8 to 5, while a search of the internet in general in 2004 showed that *snuck* was used 28% more frequently than *sneaked*. By way of comparison, my own search of the internet in March 2012 revealed that *snuck* was used 40% more frequently than *sneaked*. I will report further results from newspaper databases later and my conclusion will return to the status of *snuck* as standard or non-standard in contemporary varieties of English.

Is *snuck* really sneaking up on *sneaked*?

Although these observations and informal reports are interesting, the competition between *sneaked* and *snuck* cries out for more sophisticated quantitative investigation with corpora and other data resources to answer more precisely the question posed some time ago by Thomas Murray, who asked whether *snuck* has really been gaining in popularity, or only apparently so?[19] My own interest in *snuck* was initially sparked by publication of a study by Jean-Baptiste Michel et al. exploring the use of Google Books for quantitative research on language and culture change.[20] In 2004 Google began scanning millions of books as part of an ambitious project to make every page of every book ever published available and searchable on the internet. Now comprising more than two trillion words from fifteen million books published between 1473 and 2000 (ca. 11% of all the books ever published) scanned from sources in over forty university libraries, Google Books is the largest megacorpus and a potentially rich resource for linguists.[21] Roughly two-thirds of the books are in English (accounting for 361 billion words and expanding), but books from 478 languages (including French, German, Spanish, Chinese, Russian, and Hebrew) are also included. There are actually five English language collections available for search

[17] *The American Heritage Guide to Contemporary Usage and Style* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2005), 435-436.

[18] *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2011), 1657. This shift of opinion may have been affected by the varying composition over this time period of the Usage Panel, which has been generally dominated by writers who are conservative in matters concerning usage.

[19] Thomas E. Murray, "More on *Drug/Dragged* and *Snuck/Sneaked*: Evidence from the American Midwest", *Journal of English Linguistics*, 26 (1998), 218.

[20] Jean-Baptiste Michel et al., "Quantitative Analysis of Culture Using Millions of Digitized Books", *Science*, 331 (2011), 176-182.

[21] It is difficult to know the exact number of books published because records are incomplete and fragmentary. The definition of book is itself ambiguous. See Jean-Baptiste Michel et al., "Supporting Online Material for Quantitative Analysis of Culture Using Millions of Digitized Books", <www.sciencemag.org/cgi/content/full/science.1199644/DC1>, 18 February 2012, 19.

in Google Books: English, American English, British English, English Fiction, and English One Million. This makes Google Books a valuable site for comparing change and variation in the two major varieties of English, British and American.

Using a subset of 500 billion words from five million English books published between 1800 and 2000 (about 4% of all books published in English), one of the topics Michel et al. investigated was the rate at which irregular English verbs became regular over the past two centuries by charting n-gram trajectories showing the relative frequency of words or n-grams (up to five). An n-gram is a sequence of 1-grams, i.e. a string of characters uninterrupted by a space, e.g. *sneaked*. Phrases like *snuck off* are a 2-gram, *sneaked up on*, a 3-gram, etc. They found that although most irregulars have been stable for the past 200 years, 16% showed a slow drift toward regularity. The fastest moving verb *chide*, for instance, took 200 years for the regular past tense variant *chided* to increase from 10% to 90%. Interestingly, the trajectory for each verb was sui generis and had no characteristic shape. A few verbs like *spill* regularized at a constant speed, but others, like *thrive* and *dig* transitioned from irregular to regular past forms in fits and starts. This finding is reminiscent of the dictum offered by Jacob Grimm, who argued that "jedes Wort hat seine Geschichte und lebt sein eignes Leben" ('each word has its history and lives it own life').[22]

Although Grimm was referring to sound change and reacting against the Neogrammarian notion of absolute sound laws, his dictum has since been invoked in other cases of change. Michel et al. also looked at the opposite trend, whereby regular verbs become irregular. Examining *light/lit* and *wake/woke*, for example, they found that these verbs have been going back and forth for nearly 500 years. Both were irregular in Middle English, but were mostly regular by 1800, and subsequently reversed course to become irregular again today. Notably, however, they found at least one instance of rapid progress by an irregular form: namely, *snuck*, whose regularity has decreased from 100% to 50% over the past fifty years. They conclude that "Presently, 1% of the English-speaking population switches from "sneaked" to "snuck" every year. Someone will have snuck off while you read this sentence" (178).[23] The trend toward *snuck* is much more prominent in American English, but has been sneaking across the Atlantic. Indeed, they concluded that the United States is the world's leading exporter of both regular and irregular verbs.

These findings added yet more data to a lively discussion dating back at least to 2009 on various language and usage blogs (most notably on *Language Log* in a series of postings by Mark Liberman).[24] As Liberman and others pointed out, the frequency of both *sneaked* and *snuck* has increased over time. This trend is clearly evident for the language as a whole as well as for both British and American English in Figure 1a, b, and c showing the results obtained from Google Books Ngram Viewer, where users can search words or n-grams (to 5) and see the resulting graph.[25] The overall trajectory for *snuck* in Figure 1a, based on the entire corpus of English books, reveals the hallmarks of the classic so-called S-curve for linguistic change in progress. That is, the onset of change is slow in the so-called lag phase, as the new form *snuck* is introduced. The innovation makes little progress between 1920

[22] Jacob Grimm, *Deutsche Grammatik*, Erster Teil (Göttingen: Dieterichische Buchhandlung, 1819), xiv.

[23] See Michel et al., "Supporting Online Material", 26.

[24] See Mark Liberman, *Language Log* <http://languagelog.ldc.upenn.edu>for various blogs about 'snuck'. See also Stan Carey,"'Snuck' sneaked in", *Sentence First. An Irishman's blog about the English language* (June 18, 2010), <http://stancarey.wordpress.com/2010/06/18/snuck-sneaked-in/>, 18 February 2012.

[25] The graphs are based on results from the entire corpus produced by Google Books Ngram Viewer, <http://books.google.com/ngrams>, 18 February 2012.

and 1960, after which there is a steep and steady rise (the so-called log phase) as change reaches a tipping point, takes off and spreads rapidly after 1960. The rise in *snuck* is, however, much more pronounced in American English as shown in Figure 1c based on the sub-corpus of American English books than in British English (Figure 1b), where *sneaked* is still by far the most common variant despite a clear increase in *snuck* since around 1980. In the United States the frequency of *snuck* rises sharply after 1960 until it actually overtakes *sneaked* just after 2000. Although not all innovations proceed as far as *snuck* has, it is by no means clear that *snuck* will ever completely oust the competing variant *sneaked* in American or other varieties of English. Change may be interrupted mid-course or even completely reversed. Although language change may involve multiple mechanisms and some changes may proceed with no apparent social weighting, the social evaluation of variants often plays a role in determining the fate of a change in progress as speakers make choices between rival forms based on their perceived associations with the groups using them (e.g. social class, age, gender, etc.) or the contexts (e.g. style, text types, etc.) in which they occur. To illuminate the sociolinguistic dimensions of change in progress, however, we need more evidence from different kinds of source material.

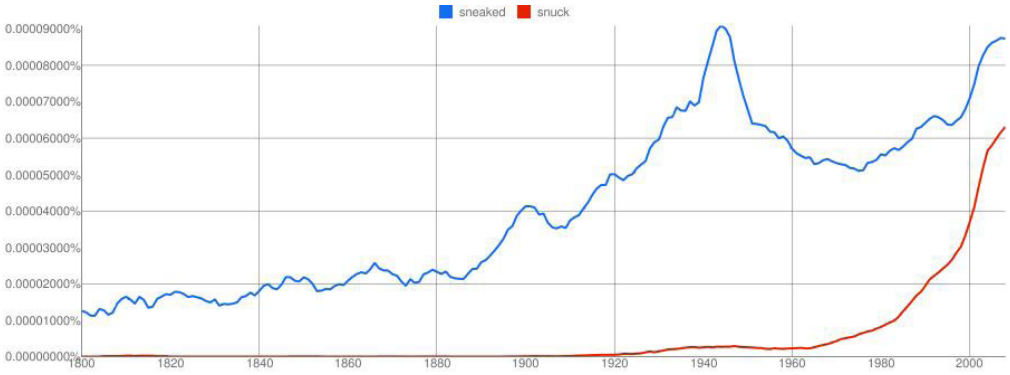

Figure 1a *sneaked* vs. *snuck* from Google Books Ngram Viewer

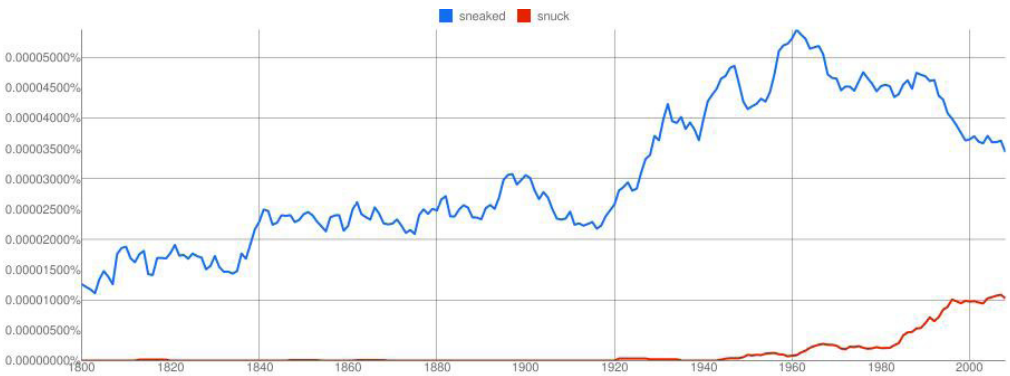

Figure 1b *sneaked* vs. *snuck* in British English from Google Books Ngram Viewer

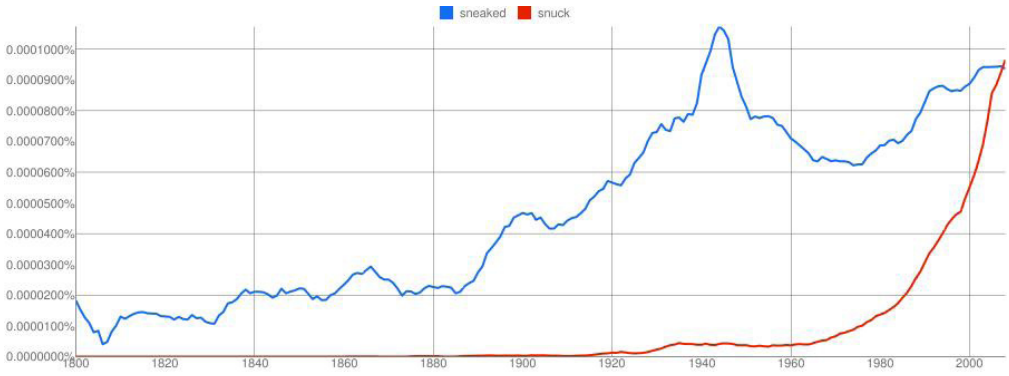

Figure 1c *sneaked* vs. *snuck* in American English from Google Books Ngram Viewer

Although Google Books is an incredibly powerful resource for exploring hypotheses about language change, it currently has many limitations by comparison with the kinds of corpora most linguists rely on. Most importantly, it does not meet commonly accepted criteria concerning sampling and representativeness. Corpora aim to be representative of some specified population of texts. W. Nelson Francis, for instance, defined a corpus as a collection of texts assumed to be representative of a given language, dialect, or other subset of language.[26] One of the most frequently used types of corpora until recently is the so-called multigenre corpus, following the design of the Brown Corpus of American English (1961), the first electronic corpus, containing one million words of text comprised of 500 word samples from fifteen written genres. By comparison, Google Books is really better described as a text bank or archive because it is opportunistic, including whatever is available and convenient. Google decided which books to scan out of those made available by participating libraries and publishers. Some attempt was made to adjust for bias in subject matter of the books included in the subcorpus used by Michel et al. to make the English One Million corpus more closely resemble a traditional balanced corpus.[27] For copyright reasons, the corpus cannot be downloaded, so users must rely on Google's search engine and interface to manipulate the data relying on the n-gram database, which reveals only the five-word neighborhood around any given term. Hence, some of tools corpus linguists most frequently rely on are not available. For example, one cannot generate word frequency lists or concordances, compute collocations, or sort books by genre or topic.[28] The genre distribution is not balanced and varies over time, making it impossible to investigate the dimension of style, genre or text type as a vector for language change. The metadata for Google Books is also not reliable and automatic genre tagging is still problematic.[29] Problems such as these have led linguists like Geoffrey Nunberg to dismiss most of the analyses in the study by Michel et al. as "almost embarrassingly crude".[30]

Although a number of synchronic and diachronic multi- and single-genre corpora have become available over the last decades, most of them are far too small to reveal much of interest about the history of *snuck* and *sneaked*. My searches resulted in very few hits in the so-called 'Brown family' of four equivalent one-million word corpora of British and American written English from 1961 and 1991, an ideal time period for examining the take-off of *snuck*. The Brown Corpus of American English (1961)

[26] W. Nelson Francis, "Problems of assembling and computerizing large corpora", in Stig Johansson, ed., *Computer Corpora in English Language Research* (Bergen: Norwegian Computing Centre for the Humanities, 1982), 7, Suzanne Romaine, "Corpus Linguistics and Sociolinguistics", in Anke Lüdeling and Merja Kytö, eds., *Corpus Linguistics. An International Handbook* (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 2008), 96-111.

[27] See Michel *et al.*, "Supporting Online Material", 13.

[28] The interface developed by Mark Davies overcomes some of these problems for a portion of the English content of Google Books: 155 billion words from more than 1.3 million books of American English from 1810 to 2007 are available for search at <http://googlebooks.byu.edu/>.

[29] Some of these problems are discussed in Michel et al., "Supporting Online Material."

[30] John Bohannon, "Google Opens Books to New Cultural Studies", *Science*, 330 (2010), 1600.

contained six examples of *sneaked* and one of *snuck*, while FROWN (Freiburg-Brown 1991) contained two of *sneaked* and none of *snuck*. Parallel corpora for British English, LOB (London/Oslo/Bergen, 1961) and FLOB (Freiburg- London/Oslo/Bergen, 1991), each contained one instance of *sneaked* and none of *snuck*. Parallel corpora for Australian and New Zealand English also revealed very few examples: ACE (Australian Corpus of English, 1986) contained one example of *sneaked* and none of *snuck*, while WC (Wellington Corpus of Written New Zealand English, 1986) contained four examples of *sneaked* and two of *snuck*. Searches in several corpora of spoken English produced no examples of either *sneaked* or *snuck*, including LLC (London-Lund Corpus), a million words from adult educated speakers of British English, and the WSC (Wellington Corpus of Spoken New Zealand English, 1988 to 1994), one million words of spoken New Zealand English. COLT (Corpus of London Teenage Language, 1993), half a million words of spontaneous British English teenage conversations, contained only two examples of *sneaked* and none of *snuck*.[31]

These negative results led me to search two diachronic megacorpora compiled by Mark Davies for American English: COHA (Corpus of Historical American English) and Time Magazine Corpus. Although COHA covers roughly the same time span as Google Books, it includes texts from four genres balanced across the decades from 1810 to 2009: fiction, non-fiction, magazines and newspapers. According to Davies, it is the largest structured corpus of historical English, containing ca. 400 million words of American English taken from 107,000 individual texts between 1810 and 2009. The smaller Time Magazine Corpus contains 100 million words from issues published between 1923 and 2006.[32] Figure 2 plotting the incidence of *sneaked* vs. *snuck* per million words in COHA supports the general trend observed in Google Books. The frequency of *sneaked* takes off toward the end of the 19th century, while *snuck* starts its take-off around the mid-20th century, and rises sharply from the 1960s onwards. Figure 3 based on data from the Time Magazine Corpus shows an increase in frequency of *snuck* only after the 1980s. The difference between the two corpora probably reflects the fact that the Time Magazine Corpus is much smaller than COHA and covers a much shorter time period. The former contained only seventeen instances of *snuck* compared to 248 in COHA.

[31] For full details and manuals for these corpora see <http://icame.uib.no/newcd.htm>, 26 March 2012.

[32] Access to both corpora is via web interface; the individual texts are not downloadable due to copyright and licensing restrictions. See COHA (Corpus of Historical American English), <http://corpus.byu.edu/coha/>, and The Time Magazine Corpus, <http://corpus.byu.edu/time/>, 18 February 2012.

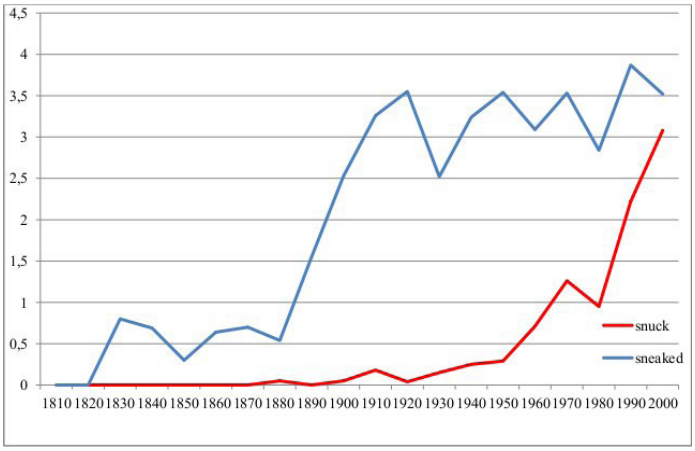

Figure 2 Incidence of *sneaked* vs. *snuck* per million words in COHA (Corpus of Historical American English)

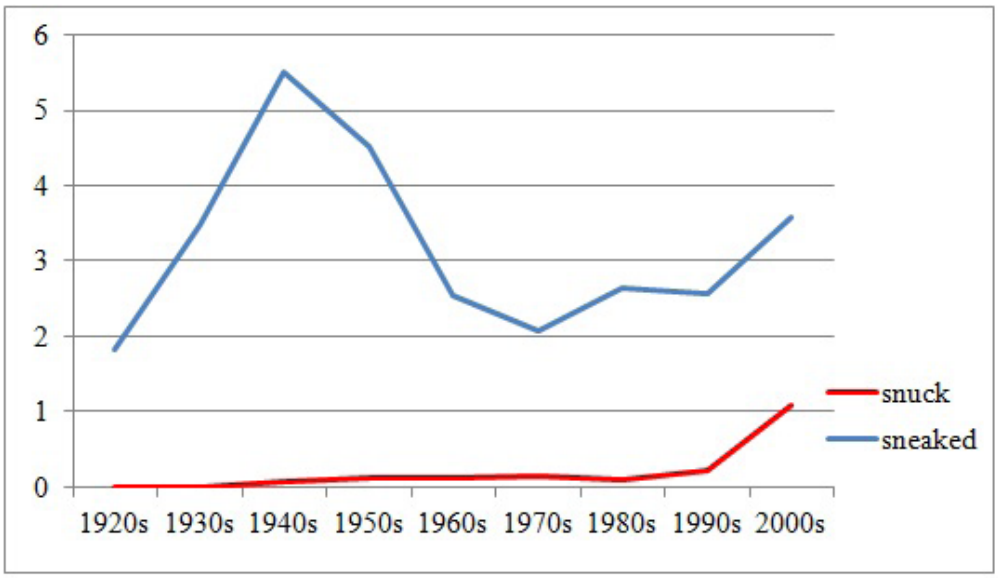

Figure 3 Incidence of *sneaked* vs. *snuck* per million words in The Time Magazine Corpus

Earliest attestations of snuck

While the results from Google Books, COHA and the Time Magazine Corpus present invaluable opportunities for uncovering the earliest attestations of *snuck*, timelines produced from unfiltered data derived from these sources require careful scrutiny. Further examination of the individual examples is required to weed out false hits. Many early examples (especially those from the large Google Books Search online tool) need to be discounted because there are OCR errors (e.g. *struck* mistaken for *snuck, snack, much*, etc.), proper names, or are not relevant for other reasons. Google estimates that over 98% of words are correctly digitized for modern English books. OCR quality is more problematic for earlier periods. Unfortunately, *snuck* is especially vulnerable to error due to the old spelling for <s> which resembles modern <f>. Michel et al. set the OCR quality threshold for their subcorpus to 60%.[33] For instance, there is a dialect word *snuck* meaning 'smell' that turns up in various dialect dictionaries and grammars from 1839 onwards.[34] Duplication and repetition across different editions of the same works, as well as date, country or language of publication errors make it necessary to adjust the counts for each year or subperiod, a task that becomes more onerous as the number of hits increases over time.

Going through the 19th century American English Google Books results manually to examine the earliest examples of *snuck* occurring between 1860 and 1899 resulted in most having to be rejected as errors of various kinds. The earliest hit from the 1860s is an OCR error for *struck*. Another example from 1870 in a translation of a journal of Soviet literature is misdated. A similar problem led me to reject at least five examples from Canadian Parliament Records incorrectly dated in 1885. Serial

[33] See Michel et al., "Supporting Online Material", 17.

[34] Francis Grose and Samuel Pegge, *A Glossary of Provincial and Local Words Used in England* (London: John Russell Smith, 1839), 147.

publications such as journals and periodicals in fact are the most inaccurately dated subclass in Google Books, with many journals incorrectly assigned publication dates erroneously attributed to the year in which the first issue of the journal was published. These kinds of errors are supposed to have been filtered out of the subcorpus used by Michel et al.[35] The earliest apparently genuine attestation from a source published in the US is dated 1886, antedating by one year the *OED*'s first citation from the *Lantern* in 1887. This example is clearly intended to represent a non-standard rural speech variety, as suggested by eye-dialect spellings like *yer* (*your*), *behin'* (*behind*), etc. The two remaining examples from this period appeared in 1889 and 1896. The latter is particularly noteworthy because it is an entry from a publication by the American Dialect Society, founded in 1889. The two examples given are said to be from Western Ohio and they indicate yet another variant, namely, *snucked,* a hybrid form in which the irregular past form is treated as a stem to which the regular past tense ending *-ed* is added: *He snucked that. He snucked up to it.*[36]

> "Well, sir, yer boy Aleck got a straw, snuck up behin' a sorrel mule, tickled him on the heels, an' –" The lady started for the door. "An' the blamed critter never lifted a hoof," called the boy.[37]

Other examples from the early decades of the twentieth generally support the observations made by Burchfield and several American dictionaries. For instance, Random House writes that *snuck* appears initially to be limited to the speech of uneducated, rural Americans because the earliest examples occur in written representations of dialect or other nonstandard use.[38] Both Merriam-Webster and Random House mention the 1930s as the time period when writers started using *snuck* for humorous effect in contexts other than dialect representation.[39] In addition, both sources contend that since the 1950s *snuck* "has been found with increasing frequency in neutral contexts – used as a standard past form in written sources without any suggestion of humorous intent."[40] Although the total number of examples from COHA and Time is too few to confirm this timeline, we know that change arises in specific contexts and becomes more generalized as it spreads to more contexts and users. A steep rise in the frequency of *snuck* from the 1960s onwards does support a pragmatic trajectory in which *snuck* is increasingly used beyond its originally restricted context of representing regional dialect and/or non-standard speech varieties to contexts conveying jocular or humorous overtones. before becoming conventionalized as the unmarked past tense form.

The two examples below from COHA illustrate how comic, jocular overtones can be conveyed by using *snuck* in representations of colloquial, conversational English. In the first of these crime writer Raymond Chandler, noted for his use of vernacular, colloquial American English, puts *snuck* into the mouth of his Los Angeles private detective, Philip Marlow, and the reply clearly indexes the form as 'witty'. COHA contains several similar examples from other Chandler novels. The second example appeared much later in *Time Magazine* (March 22, 1968), but

[35] See Michel et al., "Supporting Online Material", 6.

[36] *Dialect Notes of the American Dialect Society*, vol. 1 (Norwood, MA: J.S. Cushing & Co., 1896), 62.

[37] *Ballou's Monthly Magazine*, vol. 63 (Boston: Thomes & Talbot, 1886), 89.

[38] "The Mavens' Word of the Day" (Dec 21, 1998), <http://www.randomhouse.com/wotd/index.pperl?date=19981221>, 18 February 2012.

[39] *Merriam-Webster's Dictionary of English Usage. The Complete Guide to Problems of Confused or Disputed Usage* (Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, Inc., 1995), 854-855.

[40] "The Mavens' Word of the Day" (Dec 21, 1998).

is also clearly intended to be humorous, as indicated in the title "Yuk Among the Yaks", about a new 90-minute daily television talk show called 'This Morning'. Here the choice of *snuck* instead of *sneaked* parallels the sound symbolism in the onomatopoeic slang expressions *yuk* (also *yuck*) 'laugh' and *yak* (also *yack*) 'chatter', by virtue of having the same monosyllabic structure ending in /k/ and a vowel rhyming with *yuk*.

> Morningstar tried to call him up after I left. I snuck back into his office and overheard." "You what?" "I snuck." "Please do not be witty, Mr Marlowe.[41]
>
> Amid all the yak, yak, yak on daytime TV, he has snuck in a genuine yuk.[42]

This extension from regional dialect to the jocular domain is pragmatically motivated because non-standard varieties are often used for comedic effect. The earliest example of *snuck* from COHA illustrates this linkage between dialect and comedy. It is found in a poem by Eugene Field, who was from Missouri, and wrote mainly children's poetry. Field's poem about King Arthur's court at Camelot adopts a kind of mock Middle English style, parodying Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur* (1485).

> And whiles he searched, Sir Maligraunce rashed in,
> wood wroth, and cried,
> "Methinketh that ye straunger knyght hath snuck
> away my bride!"[43]

Field's use of *snuck* is both jocular as well as anachronistic, as far as I can tell, because I did not find examples of *sneaked* from this time period, let alone of *snuck*, after searching most of the currently available diachronic corpora including HCE (Helsinki Corpus of English), the first diachronic corpus, containing 1.6 million words from ca. 750 to 1700, or the considerably larger CEEC (Corpus of English Correspondence, 1410-1681) containing 2.7 million words. I also searched the Paston Letters (1422-1529), containing roughly a quarter million words from the personal and business correspondence exchanged by three generations of members of the Paston family from Norfolk. There were also no examples in the Helsinki Corpus of Older Scots, the Lampeter Corpus of Early Modern English Tracts, a collection of texts from 1640-1740 from the domains of religion, politics, economy & trade, science, law, and miscellaneous, or in ICAMET (Innsbruck Computer-Archive of Machine-Readable English Texts), 5.6 million words of prose texts and letters, or in the Newdigate Letters containing 2,100 manuscript newsletters dating from 1673 to 1715, most of them addressed to Sir Richard Newdigate.[44] Other diachronic corpora not in the public domain such as CLMETEV (Corpus of Late Modern English Texts Extended Version, 1850-1920)[45], containing 6.2 million words and CONCE (Corpus of Nineteenth Century English), a multigenre one million word corpus, also revealed no results.[46] ARCHER (A Representative Corpus of Historical English Registers, 1650-1999), a multi-genre corpus with ca. 3 million words of

[41] Raymond Chandler, *High Window* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1942).

[42] The Time Magazine Corpus, <http://corpus.byu.edu/time/>, 18 February 2012.

[43] Eugene W. Field, "A Proper Trewe Idyll of Camelot", in *A Little Book of Western Verse* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1891), 145.

[44] For full details and manuals for these corpora see <http://icame.uib.no/newcd.htm>, 26 March 2012.

[45] <https://perswww.kuleuven.be/~u0044428/>, 26 March 2012.

[46] A Corpus of Nineteenth-Century English, compiled by Merja Kytö (Uppsala University) and Juhani Rudanko (University of Tampere).

British and American English contained two instances of *sneaked*, but none of *snuck*.[47] The Corpus of English Dialogues 1560-1760, a 1.2-million-word corpus of Early Modern English speech-related texts, contained one example of *sneaked* and none of *snuck*.

These negative results led me to search a variety of other text collections and databases, to which historical linguists are increasingly turning in order to augment traditional corpora. One of the most commonly used is LION (Literature On line), a commercial database containing more than 350,000 works of British and American literature from the 8th century to present. Launched in 1996, and advertised as the world's largest cross-searchable database of literature, it includes poetry, drama, and prose, organized into individual collections available by subscription.[48] Disappointingly, LION contained only 28 examples of *snuck*, all in modern (i.e. 20th century) poetry, and none in its drama and prose collections, including the American Drama collection comprising more than 1,500 dramatic works from 1714 to 1915. There were also no examples of *snuck* in Early English Books Online (EEBO), a joint project of the University of Michigan and the University of Oxford containing digital facsimile page images of virtually every work printed in England, Ireland, Scotland, Wales, British North America and works in English printed elsewhere from 1473 to 1700.[49]

Other more specialized electronic databases returned similar disappointing results. These included the Proceedings of the Old Bailey, a collection of 197,745 trials held from 1674 to 1913 at London's central criminal court[50], and several collections compiled by Alexander Street Press available by subscription. The latter included Early Encounters in North America: Peoples, Cultures, and the Environment 1534 to 1850, containing 100,000 pages of text focusing on personal accounts from traders, slaves, missionaries, and explorers; British and Irish Women's Letters and Diaries containing more than 100,000 pages of personal writings of women from England, Scotland, Ireland, and Wales from the last 400 years; North American Women's Letters and Diaries containing diaries and letters from 1,017 women during the 18th to 20th centuries; and North American Immigrant Letters, Diaries and Oral Histories, containing more than 100,000 pages of letters, diaries and narratives from immigrants to North America from various countries, including Britain and Ireland from 1800 to 1950.[51] Only the latter two sources contained instances of *snuck* (one in North American Women's Letters and Diaries and 28 in North American Immigrant Letters, Diaries and Oral Histories), but these were all from the late 20th century. There were only eight instances of *sneaked* and none of *snuck* in Early Encounters, and no instances of either variant in British and Irish Women's Letters and Diaries. I also searched the Victorian Women Writers Project, a collection of writings from lesser-known 19th century female authors, but found only six examples of *sneaked* and none of *snuck*.[52] I chose these particular resources in order to follow up Mirriam-Webster's suggestion that *snuck* may have been "a survival in some obscure northern English or Scottish dialect" brought to North America by settlers.[53]

[47] <http://www.llc.manchester.ac.uk/research/projects/archer/>, 26 March 2012. Because ARCHER is not publicly available for copyright reasons, I thank Merja Kytö of Uppsala University and Nuria Yáñez-Bouza of Manchester University for conducting this search for me in the latest working version 3.2.

[48] LION [Literature on line], <http://lion.chadwyck.com/>, 2 March 2012. My access included the core collection.

[49] Early English Books Online, < http://ets.umdl.umich.edu/e/eebo/>, 2 March 2012.

[50] The Proceedings of the Old Bailey 1674 to 1913, <http://www.oldbaileyonline.org/>.

[51] Early Encounters in North America: Peoples, Cultures, and the Environment, <http://alexanderstreet.com/products/early-encounters-north-america>, 2 March 2012. British and Irish Women's Letters and Diaries, <http://alexanderstreet.com/products/british-and-irish-womens-letters-and-diaries>; North American Women's Letters and Diaries, <http://alexanderstreet.com/products/north-american-womens-letters-and-diaries>; North American Immigrant Letters, Diaries and Oral Histories 1800 to 1950, <http://alexanderstreet.com/products/north-american-immigrant-letters-diaries-and-oral-histories>. All accessed , 2 March 2012.

[52] Victorian Women Writers Project, < http://webapp1.dlib.indiana.edu/vwwp/welcome.do>, 2 March 2012.

[53] *Merriam-Webster's Dictionary* (855).

As for the equally intriguing form *snucked*, insufficient data prevent drawing firm conclusions. Google Books contained only 43 examples, the first of which is shown below and dates from 1920.[54] The scare quotes and italics in this example index both *snuck* and *snucked* as non-standard and jocular. Other examples clearly situate the form in the context of dialect representations, often specifically Southern States or African American Vernacular English. "Snucked up on me" is the title of a rap by Diamond, stage name for American rapper Brittany Nicole Carpentero. [55] I also found a few examples from Canada, Australia and New Zealand.

> My intense desire to help my country in the last four years kept me out of the theatrical profession and in the interim many have "snuck" in that should be "*snucked*" out.[56]

Sociolinguistic patterning: How snuck snuck up on sneaked

I am not aware of any large-scale sociolinguistic studies examining social dimensions of use of *snuck* in spoken English. However, both Thomas Cresswell and Thomas Murray report that they found no regional pattern.[57] After surveying a convenience sample of 10,256 consultants from twelve states (Michigan, Wisconsin, Missouri, Illinois, Minnesota, North and South Dakota, Nebraska, Kansas, Iowa, and Ohio), Murray found that *snuck* was widely accepted without regard for gender, ethnicity, or socio-economic class. Only ca. 5% of consultants offered negative evaluations or opinions about users of *snuck*, whom they considered as ignorant or vulgar (216). For those accepting the form, however, approval was complete: fewer than 1% reported that they would not use it in writing (218). Looking at the age distribution of his consultants, Murray (218) concluded that *snuck*'s gain in popularity was not only genuine, but dramatic. Acceptance of *snuck* among the oldest group of consultants between 60 to 80 years old was only 37%, while among the youngest group twenty years old or younger, acceptance was 54%. Hence Murray concurs with Cresswell (154) that *snuck* may be on its way to becoming the new standard form. Mark Liberman adds weight to this view, concluding on the basis of evidence from the LDC's (Linguistic Data Consortium) collection of conversational transcripts, that "basically, *sneaked* is toast".[58] There were 52 instances of *snuck* versus 5 instances of *sneak* in the conversations, which amount to about 25 million words, mostly collected in 2003 from people across all ages, regions, socio-economic levels and amounts of education.

The predominance of *snuck* over *sneaked* in spoken American English is supported by the evidence from COCA (Corpus of Contemporary American English) containing 425 million words, including twenty million words from each year between 1990-2011.[59] The COCA material is equally divided among spoken, fiction, popular magazines, newspapers and academic texts, making this the largest freely available corpus of English, and the only large and balanced corpus of American English. Figure 4 shows the incidence of *sneaked* vs. *snuck* per million words in COCA. Overall, *sneaked* (52%) is slightly more common than *snuck*

[54] These results are based on a search of American English from 1810 to 2007 using <http://googlebooks.byu.edu/>. They require filtering to weed out errors and unrelated meanings. See, for example, the entries in the Urban Dictionary, <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=snucked>, 2 March 2012.

[55] *P.M.S.* (Pardon my swag), (2009) , <http://diamondatl.com/rapper-diamond/biography/>, 2 March 2012.

[56] Marie Dressler, "Have Chorus Girls Been Maligned?", in Mary Ethel McAuley, ed., *The Wanderer or: Or,Many Minds on Many Subjects* (New York: boni & Liveright, 1920), 258.

[57] Thomas J. Cresswell, "Dictionary Recognition of Developing Forms: The Case of *Snuck*", in Greta D. Little and Michael Montgomery, eds., *Centennial Usage Studies* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1994), 144-154.

[58] M. Liberman, "Snuckward Ho!", and "The Unexpected Attractiveness of *Snuck*".

[59] COCA (Corpus of Historical American English), <http://corpus.byu.edu/coca/>, 18 February 2012.

(48%). In the spoken material, however, which includes transcripts of unscripted conversation from more than 150 different television and radio programs, *snuck* clearly predominates. Not surprisingly, all the written genres favor *sneaked*, with fiction in the lead and academic texts bringing up the rear, reflecting the conservative tendencies of formal written English over other genres. The evidence from COHA shown in Figure 5 yields a similar picture, with newspapers (followed by non-fiction) being the most conservative genres. Newspapers contained only four examples of *snuck*, two from the 1980s, and two from the 2000s.

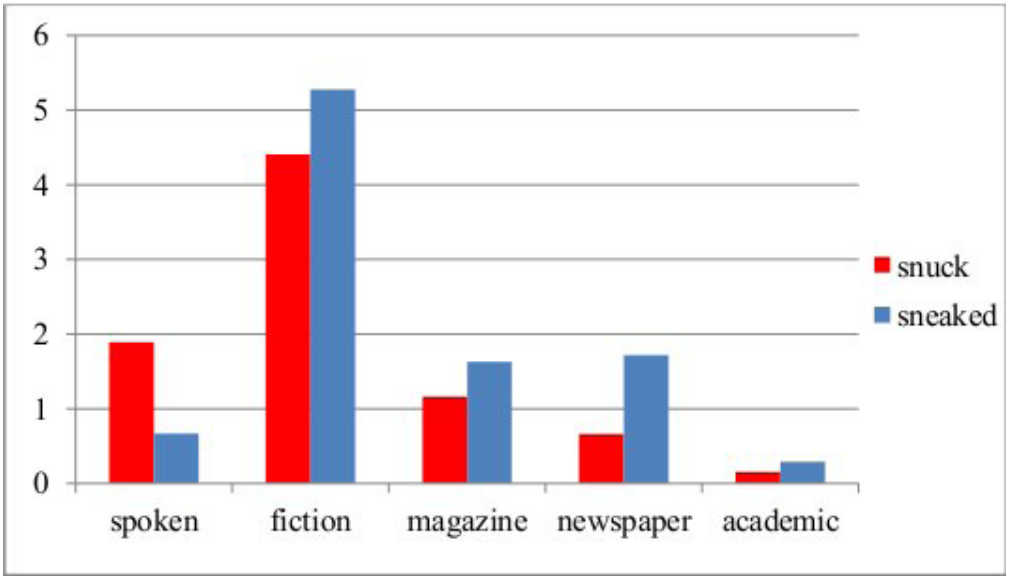

Figure 4 Incidence of *sneaked* vs. *snuck* per million words by genre in COCA (Corpus of Contemporary American English)

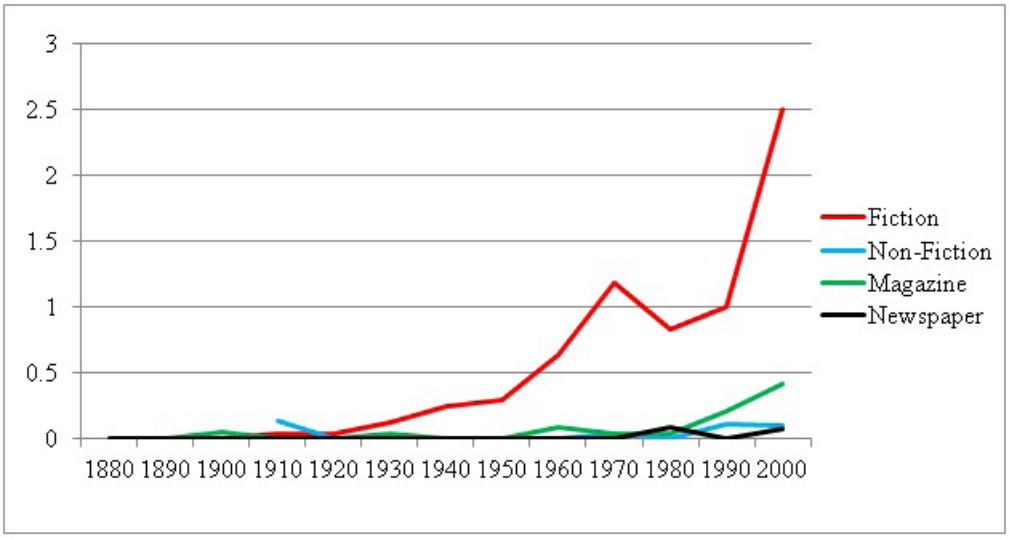

Figure 5 Incidence of *snuck* per million words by genre in COHA (Corpus of Historical American English)

Unfortunately, there is no corpus of British English of comparable size to COCA. Nevertheless, the importance of genre is evident in the BNC (British National Corpus) containing 100 million words of spoken and written material from the 1990s.[60] Neither *sneaked* (N=132) nor *snuck* (N=11) is frequent, but *snuck* occurs most frequently (N=5) in fiction, with two additional examples in magazines and one example in the category of miscellaneous texts. There are no examples of *snuck* in newspapers or academic texts, and only three examples in spoken English. This leaves the regional distribution of *snuck* beyond American English unclear. Cresswell (152) states that *snuck* is well established and standard in spoken Canadian English and is growing in use in Britain and Australia, but offers no quantitative evidence. As noted earlier, ACE and the Wellington Corpora are too small to yield many examples of either *sneaked* or *snuck*.

[60] BNC (British National Corpus), <http://corpus.byu.edu/bnc/>, 18 February 2012.

Nevertheless, it is possible to construct a broad overview of the competition between *sneaked* and *snuck* in the major written varieties of English by using Google to gather data from newspaper websites. I compared the incidence of the two variants in a convenience sample of thirty newspapers from the US, UK, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and Ireland. Figure 6 shows the percent of *snuck* in each of the major varieties of English as represented by my sample of newspapers. The results show Canada in the lead, with *snuck* at 90%, clearly way ahead of the United States, the only other variety showing a majority of *snuck* (51%) over *sneaked*. My results for the US can be compared with those from COCA in Figure 4. Although COCA included material from ten newspapers published in the US, including *USA Today, Christian Science Monitor, New York Times, Atlanta Journal Constitution, San Francisco Chronicle*, *Washington Post*, and the Associated Press, the world's oldest and largest newsgathering organization, there were only 60 examples of *snucked* compared to 149 of *sneaked*. This means that overall *snuck* occurred at a rate of 29%, compared to my sample, where *snuck* (51%) and *sneaked* (49%) were nearly equal in frequency in US newspapers.

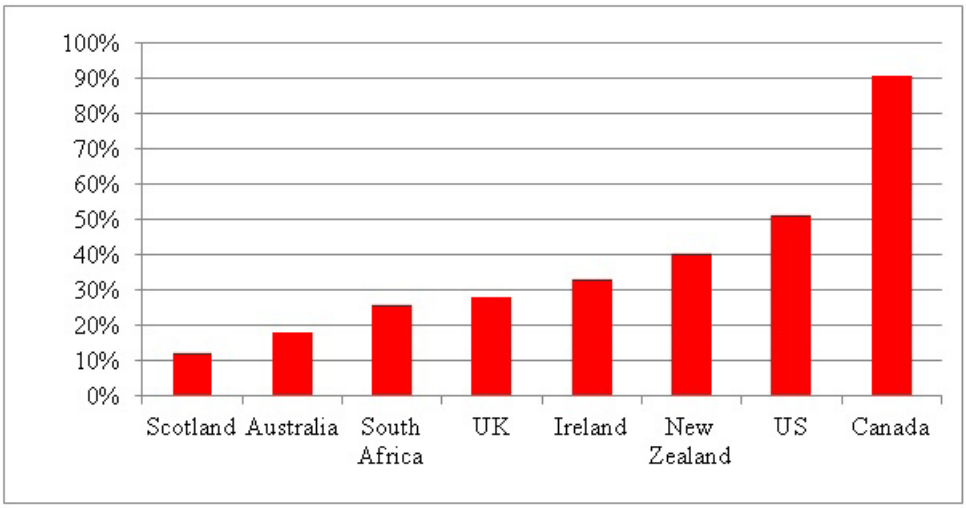

Figure 6 Percent of *snuck* in varieties of English as represented by newspapers

Perhaps more instructive, however, is a more detailed look at the individual papers in the sample. Figure 7 reveals a great range of variability across individual papers, reflecting my opportunistic method of sampling as well as the heterogeneity of newspapers as a genre. Apart from Canada, whose newspapers all cluster together in the lead, each showing *snuck* occurring at a frequency of more than 80%, the newspapers from the other countries show a range of variability. The US newspapers, for example, range from 45% (*LA Times*) to 71% (*USA Today*) in their frequency of occurrence of *snuck*. The biggest range of variability, however, is found in the samples representing Australia and the UK. Three of the Australian newspapers cluster together at the lower end of the spectrum with regard to the frequency of *snuck*, which varies from 14.39% (*The Melbourne Age*) to 19.01% (*The Australian*) and 20.1% (*The Sydney Morning Herald)*, while the Melbourne tabloid *Herald Sun* shows predominant use of *snuck* (58.16%) over *sneak* and is even slightly ahead of US newspapers such as *The Washington Post* (52.53%) and the *San Francisco Chronicle* (55.09%), as well as way ahead of the *LA Times* (45.77%), the most conservative of the US newspapers. The difference between Australia and New Zealand is notable, given that these two varieties often share common developments, but this may reflect my choice of newspapers. Most of the newspapers included in my sample are high quality dailies with wide national circulation, while only a few represent tabloid journalism such as *The Sun*, the largest daily tabloid in the UK. Interestingly, however, it is the latter that shows the least frequent use of *snuck* (9.85%), while the high quality dailies such as the *Guardian* (25.51%), *Times* (27.08%), *Independent* (29.23%) and *Telegraph* (43.93%) all show higher rates. Indeed, the difference between the *Sun* and the *Telegraph* is quite striking. The smallest range of variability occurs in the newspapers sampled from Canada (81% to 91%), South Africa (25% to 34%), and New Zealand (39% to 50%).

Newspapers also comprise a range of sub-genres including, for example, news reports of various kinds (e.g. business vs. political), letters, editorials, advertising, sports, obituaries, to name just a few categories having their own conventions and stylistic markers relating to subject matter. In the US newspapers in COHA, for example, 20% of the occurrences of *snuck* were in sports reporting, while in the *Irish Times* nearly half (49%) were.[61] Newspapers also have different house styles, presumably at least partly because particular newspapers have a specific audience in mind. Overall, my results suggest a more nuanced view than that of Liberman, who surveyed a smaller sample of eleven newspapers from the US, UK, Ireland and Australia and concluded that "snuck is winning world-wide, with the UK apparently bringing up the rear."[62]

[61] The other newspapers sampled do not report tallies by sections/topics.

[62] M. Liberman, "Snuckward Ho!".

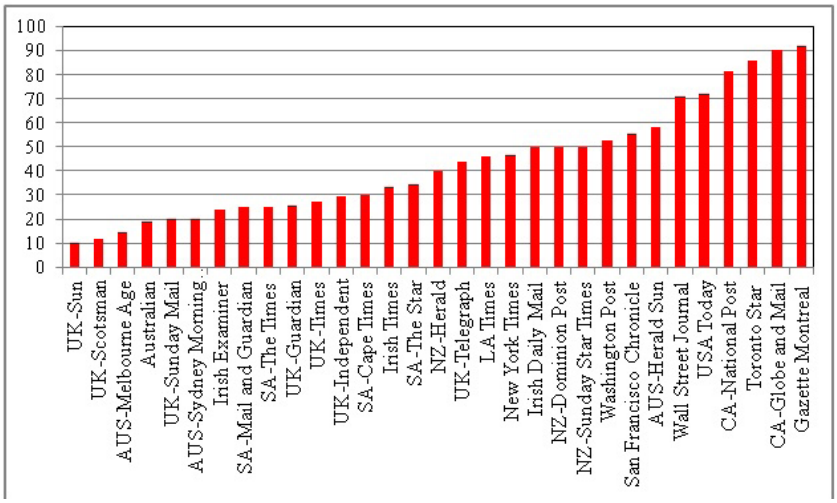

Figure 7 Percent of *snuck* in newspapers representing varieties of English

The newspaper results are interesting in the light of observations on frequency data from the *American Heritage Dictionary*'s newspaper databases in 2004 that showed *sneaked* outhitting *snuck* by a factor of 8 to 5.[63] The inclusion in my sample of four of the same newspapers in COCA permits a comparison of the findings shown in Figure 8, which shows *snuck* clearly leading over *sneaked* by a wide margin in my sample. Indeed, in each newspaper *snuck* is two to three times as frequent as in COCA, with the biggest difference appearing in *USA Today*.

[63] *The American Heritage Guide to Contemporary Usage and Style* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2005), 436.

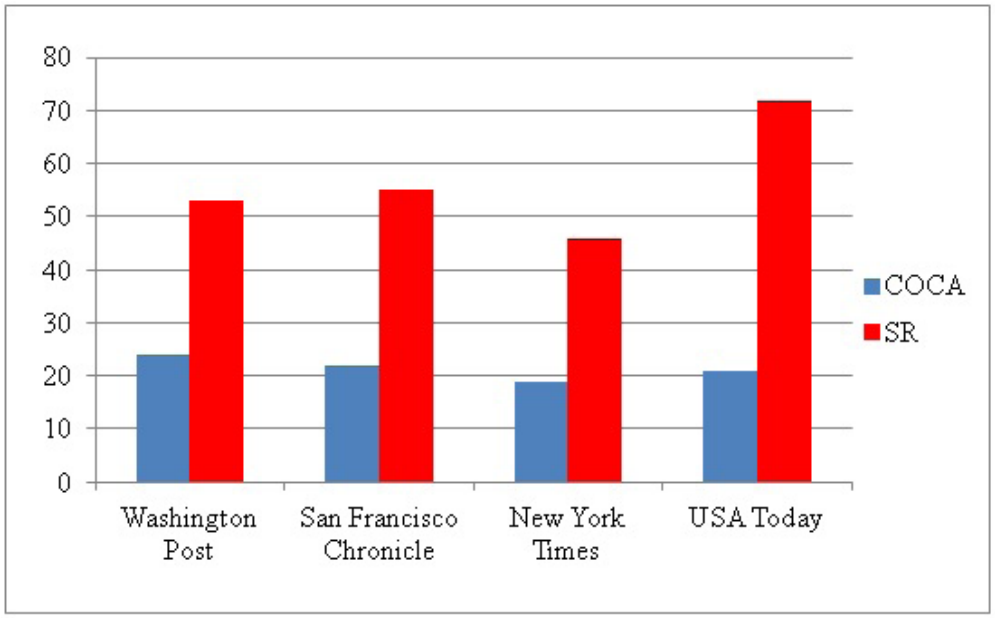

Figure 8 Percent of *snuck* in US newspapers in COCA and my sample (SR)

Conclusion, or Someone will have snuck off while you read this

Much more remains to be done to document the history and evolution of *snuck*, a task which should not be pursued in isolation without due consideration of *sneak* as well. Although the complete story of *sneak* has been beyond my remit here, even casual searching of earlier texts and corpora for *snuck* revealed quite a few examples that antedate by several decades the *OED*'s first attestation of the verb *sneak* and other variant forms in the works of Shakespeare. This indicates a clear need for updating the *OED*'s information, which has served as the source for countless other dictionaries, which have simply repeated uncritically parts of the etymology and citations from its entry. For example, a blog hosted by dictionary publisher Random House observes that "[l]ike so many others, *sneak* is first recorded in the works of Shakespeare"[64] In fact, other authors such as Richard Stanyhurst, Anthony Munday, George Whetstone, Anthony Copley, Robert Wilson, and Thomas Nash used it earlier. Indeed, Shakespeare may have borrowed it from them or from Holinshed's *Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland* (1577), one of the most important sources he and other contemporary playwrights and poets used, which has one instance

[64] *The Mavens' Word of the Day* (Dec 21, 1998), <http://www.randomhouse.com/wotd/index.pperl?date=19981221>, 18 February 2012.

earlier than those cited by the *OED*. I also found one example of the verb *sneak* a decade earlier than Holinshed in a text from 1566 translated from Latin by John Studley, a student at Trinity College, Cambridge. I also discovered one instance of the regular past tense form *sneaked* from the following year, which antedates the *OED*'s first citation from 1631, as well as an example of transitive *sneak* from 1641 antedating the *OED*'s first citation in 1684. The revised timeline below compares my findings with those of the *OED*, with attestations antedating the *OED* indicated in bold preceded by my initials.

Revised timeline for first attestations of main variant forms of *sneak* recorded by *OED*

1560 *sneakishly* adverb

1570 *sneakish* adjective

1582 *sneaking* adjective **[SR 1576]**[65]

1598 *sneak* verb **[SR 1566]**; *sneaker* noun; *sneak-up* noun; *sneakingly* adverb **[SR 1596]**[66]
O Iason doest thou sneake awaye, not hauyng mynde of me, Nor of those former great good turns that I haue done for the? (1566, EEBO, *The seuenth tragedie of Seneca, entituled Medea: translated out of Latin into English*)

1631 *sneaked* regular past tense **[SR 1567]**
Two or three nights later, the miller sneaked into church with some snails which, after he had secured candles to their backs, were left to creep about. (1567, Anonymous, *Merie Tales, A Corpus of English Dialogues* 1560-1760, p. 79)

1684 *sneak* verb (transitive) **[SR 1641]**
Because your Grace hath sneakt your head out of the coller so long. (1641, EEBO, *Canterbury's Will*)

[65] I found five examples of adjectival *sneaking* in LION Drama antedating the OED, four of which were from works by George Whetstone published in 1576.

[66] One example in EEBO of adverbial *sneakingly* in a work by Thomas Nash published in 1596 antedates the *OED*.

My findings also reveal a clear need for systematic charting of the occurrences of *sneak* and its variants in different text types and genres, in order to follow up Burchfield's suggestion that after *sneak* entered the language, it made its way swiftly into the language of playwrights. This may well prove to be true, but would require more diligent searching. To shed light on the early history of *sneak* and its spread through the language, I searched EEBO and LION, which revealed ninety four examples of the past tense form of *sneak* (including variant spellings *sneakd/t* and *sneak'd/'t*) in EEBO, while LION contained 2,032, most of them (N=1,662) in Drama texts. Searching more specifically through the drama collection in LION, containing more than 5,400 plays (both prose and verse) covering a period of over 700 years from the late 13th to the early 20th century, I uncovered 354 examples of *sneak* and its variants dating from the first attestation in 1585 to 1700. Although LION does not classify these dramas into sub-genres such as comedy, tragedy etc., in 80% of cases (N=283) it was possible to produce a provisional categorization of texts by using subtitles or other information in the title or bibliographic entry. I also searched the Corpus of English Dialogues 1560-1760, which contained eleven

instances of *sneak* and its variants, only two of which occurred in drama, in David Garrick's comedy drama *The Male-Coquette* (1757). The majority (N=7) are found in prose fiction. Two further examples come from the category of Anonymous Didactic Works Other than Language Teaching. variant spellings *sneakd/t* and *sneak'd/'t*) in EEBO, while LION contained 2,032, most of them (N=1,662) in Drama texts. Searching more specifically through the drama collection in LION, containing more than 5,400 plays (both prose and verse) covering a period of over 700 years from the late 13th to the early 20th century, I uncovered 354 examples of *sneak* and its variants dating from the first attestation in 1585 to 1700. Although LION does not classify these dramas into sub-genres such as comedy, tragedy etc., in 80% of cases (N=283) it was possible to produce a provisional categorization of texts by using subtitles or other information in the title or bibliographic entry. The majority of occurrences (62%, N=221) appeared in texts self-titled as comedies and farces.[67]

For many users *snuck* has indeed snuck in "so smooth and slippery we didn't even hear it". Another quote from the same source referring to a musical chord also seems apt: "It's snuck in so discreetly, you don't pick it up as being definite dissonance".[68] Nevertheless, despite assertions from Random House that "snuck is fully standard in American English", the growing groundswell toward *snuck* still jars some sensibilities. The late James J. Kilpatrick, a nationally syndicated American columnist with conservative views on grammar, objected strongly to Random House's sanctioning of *snuck* when the dictionary opined that "*Snuck* has occasionally been considered non-standard, but it is so widely used by professional writers and educated speakers that it can no longer be so regarded. It is the only past tense form for many younger and middle aged persons of all educational levels in the United States and Canada".[69] Kilpatrick contended that "this tolerant view has not snuck up on me; it has sneaked up on me. I will have none of it. To my ear 'snuck' has a jocular sound".[70] *Time Magazine* also disapproved of Random House's decision in its review of the dictionary, which may account for the fact that the Time Magazine Corpus contained only seventeen examples of *snuck*.[71]

Kilpatrick is by no means the only one on whose ears *snuck* sneaked up. Linguist Edward Finegan, for example, relates his own surprise when asked for advice by a first year law student who showed him an assignment in which an advanced law school student serving as a student instructor had crossed out *sneaked* and replaced it with *snuck*.Wondering who would find *snuck* preferable to *sneaked* led him to consult a dictionary of legal usage relying on the corpus of legal texts provided by Lexis-Nexis, where he encountered yet another surprise: a third of the instances of past tense *sneak* in published American legal cases were realized as *snuck*. After Finegan's search of law journals in Lexis-Nexis revealed *snuck* in the lead over *sneaked,* he concluded that "s*nuck* is definitively on the upswing in frequency and status", and that the instructor who had marked *sneaked* wrong was ahead of the curve, while he himself was behind it in still considering *snuck* as casual, humorous and non-standard.[72] In fact, the legal dictionary also judged *snuck* as nonstandard

[67] EEBO's lack of annotation for features such as genre, etc. make this source less useful than LION. It is difficult to compare the LION and EEBO results directly because normalization of the results is not possible, also compilers were also not attempting to establish a representative sampling of text types.

[68] *Time Magazine* (January 12, 1970), <http: //corpus.byu.edu/time/ >, 18 February 2012.

[69] *The Mavens' Word of the Day* (Dec 21, 1998), and *The Random House Dictionary of the English Language* (New York: Random House, 1987), 1807.

[70] James J. Kilpatrick, "Bad Verbs Snuck in and Drug up a Chair", *Times Daily* (July 8, 1990), <http://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=1842&dat=19900708&id=CEoeAAAAIBAJ&sjid=BMcEAAAAIBAJ&pg=1286,941789>, 18 February 2012. See also James J. Kilpatrick, "What's Past Is Past, Unless It Snuck Up Behind You", *The Seattle Times* (May 21, 1995), <http://community.seattletimes.nwsource.com/archive/?date=19950521&slug=2122055>, 18 February 2012.

[71] *Time Magazine*, "Surveying the State of the Lingo: The Random House Dictionary of the English Language (November 2, 1987), <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,965885-3,00.html>, 2 March 2012.

[72] Edward Finegan, "Linguistic Prescription: Familiar Practices and New Perspectives", *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 23 (2003), 214.

and recommended *sneaked* as the appropriate form for formal writing. This decision is interesting by comparison with my earlier remarks about the *American Heritage Dictionary*'s recognition of *snuck* as standard even before usage trends revealed it to be the most frequently used past tense variant of *sneak* as well as before its Usage Panel accepted it.

Generally speaking, this narrative underlines the unreliability of intuition on matters of usage as well as the need for marshalling quantitative evidence of the kind I have used here. Moreover, it highlights continuing tensions between descriptive and prescriptive concerns. Although Finegan concluded that "*snuck* now fraternizes with snooty *incapacitated, clandestine, equivocal*, and *regulatory* – not bad for an upstart of dubious genealogy",[73] for some it still carries negative connotations. Some readers of the *Mail on Sunday*, the UK's best selling newspaper, regard *snuck* as one of the most hated Americanisms.[74] Figure 7 shows that this newspaper is one of the more, but by no means the most, conservative users of *snuck* (20%) among my sample of UK newspapers. Nevertheless, British users are not the only ones holding out against the North American mudslide. At least two usage guides on American English that I consulted advise readers not to use *snuck*. Paul W. Lovinger, for instance, opines that "*sneaked* is the proper past tense and past participle of *sneak*. If chosen at all, *snuck* should be restricted to a frivolous context".[75] In a similar vein is Mark Davidson's "risk-free recommendation- for now use *snuck* only with a playful wink".[76] These remarks demonstrate that the last stage of change in which *snuck* becomes conventionalized and universally accepted as the unmarked past tense form has not yet reached all users of all varieties of English. Finally, lest readers think I have snuck off without saying more about the competition between *snuck* and *snucked*, it is possible that *snuck* may never replace *sneaked* entirely, especially if *snucked* sneaks up on *snuck*. *Sneaked* is not yet toast!

[73] Ibid., 216.

[74] Matthew Engel, "Britain Declares War on Words that Suck into Our Schedule", (5 June 2010), <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1284254/Britain-declares-war-words-snuck-skedule-.html>, 17 March 2012.

[75] Paul W. Lovinger, *The Penguin Dictionary of American English Usage and Style* (New York: Penguin, 2000), 287.

[76] Mark Davidson, *Right, Wrong, and Risky. A Dictionary of Today's American English Usage* (New York: W.W. Norton Co., 2006), 487.